

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 702

HE 026 452

AUTHOR Bensimon, Estela Mara
TITLE Feminist Thought as a Source of Critique and Reconceptualization of Multiculturalism in Higher Education.
INSTITUTION National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, University Park, PA.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Jun 92
CONTRACT R117G10037
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual National Conference on Racial and Ethnic Relations in American Higher Education (5th, San Francisco, CA, June 5-9, 1992). For a related document, see HE 026 453.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; Colleges; Criticism; Cultural Pluralism; Educational Change; Ethnic Groups; Evaluation; *Feminism; *Higher Education; Minority Groups; *Multicultural Education; *Organizational Change; Universities
IDENTIFIERS *Diversity Concept

ABSTRACT

This paper uses feminist theory in exploring multicultural change in academic institutions of higher education. It argues that multiculturalism, while attaining increased acceptance in academic institutions, is actually being shaped to fit into the established organizational parameters without any discomfort to or real change within the organization. Insights are used from feminist thinking to construct a critique of the institutional strategies being used on some college campuses to bring about multicultural organizational change. These insights serve as a focus for examination of current approaches being used in multicultural education in three areas: (1) the trouble with additive approaches; (2) the trouble with bipolar differences; and (3) the trouble with the problematics that define multicultural education. The paper concludes with the argument that as long as academic institutions attempt to implement multicultural education without first coming to terms with the presence of racism, sexism, and heterosexist "micropractices" on their campuses, then they only deceive themselves and harm their students. Contains 11 references. (GLR)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED357702

FEMINIST THOUGHT AS A SOURCE OF CRITIQUE AND
RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF MULTICULTURALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Estela Mara Bensimon
Associate Professor & Research Associate
Center for the Study of Higher Education
The Pennsylvania State University
(814) 865-8367

and

Co-director
Organizational Structures and Policies Project
National Center for Postsecondary Teaching,
Learning and Assessment

This paper was prepared for the session on Critical & Feminist Leadership: Strategies of Empowerment presented at the Fifth Annual National Conference on Racial & Ethnic Relations in American Higher Education, June 5-9, 1992, San Francisco California.

This document was prepared pursuant to a grant from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement/Department of Education (OERI/ED). However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the OERI/ED and no official endorsement of the OERI/ED should be inferred.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

□ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

Project No.: R117G10037
CFDA No.: 84.117G

HE 026 452

FEMINIST THOUGHT AS A SOURCE OF CRITIQUE AND
RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF MULTICULTURALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

I will begin with a personal disclosure about an incident that left a strong impression and which, I suspect, is behind many of the ideas presented in this paper. In the mid 70's I worked in a grassroots community organization in Trenton, New Jersey called Congreso Boricua--The Puerto Rican Congress. During my two years at the Congreso most of my energy was dedicated to advancing bilingual and bicultural education in New Jersey's school system as well as in the state's system of higher education. Although we succeeded in some important ways, many of our efforts to participate in defining the content of education for persons who came from Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Central America were met with great hostility. It was a tremendous struggle, particularly given that in those days the term multicultural was used only by those of us who spoke a different language and came from different countries. In the late seventies, I became the coordinator of bilingual and bicultural education in the New Jersey Department of Higher Education. Even though I was now part of the system, the struggle became more intensified for now I had to deal with the indifference of my colleagues, most of whom perceived bilingual/bicultural education as a compensatory educational strategy of very dubious value. Many spoke of it as an affirmative action program for Hispanics. It was practically impossible then, as I am sure it is still today, to make a

persuasive case for the pedagogical values of bilingual and bicultural education. A few months after I was appointed to the position of coordinator I found on my desk an editorial published in the Wall Street Journal entitled Against Bilingual Education, with an unsigned note commanding me to "Read this."

In light of that encounter and many others like it in an organizational environment that was extremely alienating and non-supportive of educational efforts that challenged the norm, I have watched with interest, surprise, but also with considerable skepticism the popularization of multicultural education in colleges and universities. The increased acceptance of multiculturalism and the celebration of diversity are welcome changes; nevertheless, I am concerned about the form that multiculturalism is taking on in our campuses.

This paper consists mostly of a complaint. My complaint is simple: I am concerned that multiculturalism is being normalized. By normalized I mean that multiculturalism is being shaped so as to fit in neatly within established organizational parameters. The conflict aspects of multiculturalism are being suppressed so as not to cause discomfort.

I am also concerned that multicultural education is being converted into an enlightened self-interest strategy to deal with the prospect of an increasingly nonwhite working force.

To elaborate on my complaint about the normalization of multiculturalism I draw on insights from feminist thinking. And through these feminist insights I construct a critique of the

institutional strategies being used in some of our college campuses to bring about multicultural organizational change. The feminist concepts introduced tend to be abstract, therefore I will attempt to make them more accessible by providing brief examples from a case study about a university that adopted a diversity requirement.

I turn now to the following question: What does feminist theory have to do with multicultural organizational change?

Feminist thinking can be characterized as being centrally concerned with exposing patterns of oppression based on power inequalities between the sexes (Harding, 1991). Feminist scholars have documented that concepts which have been (and often still are) accepted as neutral and neuter are in fact a reflection of male dominance over definitions of what counts as knowledge and how reality is experienced.

I see the intersection between feminism and multiculturalism in at least three preliminary ways. First, multiculturalism focuses on the ways in which gender, race, sexual orientation, and class differences are inscribed in political, cultural, and cultural practices. In this regard the multicultural and feminist project share the goal of bringing differences from the margin to the center (Hooks, 1984). Second, multiculturalism is about the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (West, 1991; Collins, 1991). Thus, the multicultural and feminist projects share the concern with recovering the "silenced" histories, literature, philosophies of women, people of color, gay, and

lesbian persons and enabling their self-representation (as opposed to representation) within the "canon." Third, multiculturalism is about the creation of democratic, non-oppressive institutions. In this regard the aim of the multicultural and feminist projects is the exposure of cultural practices, structures, and policies that are racist, sexist, heterosexist, and classist.

I turn now to a second question: How can feminist theory(s) inform multicultural organizational change

Before answering this question we need to understand normative conceptions of organizational change. This past year I visited three campuses as part of the national study on organizational change. These three institutions are struggling with issues of multiculturalism. Based on interviews with college officials, faculty, and trustees I became increasingly convinced that conventional approaches of organizational change are inappropriate to bring about multiculturalism.

Administrators have been socialized into viewing their campuses as if they were a cohesive whole, with all persons aspiring to a common knowledge and culture. A premium is placed on the maintenance of equilibrium; a conflict free campus is seen as a sign of effective leadership. Within this vision any out-of-the ordinary manifestation--like multiculturalism--that threatens disorder, disruption, or conflict is viewed with fear, as something in need of containment. When administrative thinking places a premium on rationality there is an inclination

to perceive multiculturalism as a problem in need of management. This mindset produces strategies to design multicultural education as an adjustment, taking care not to disturb the overall functioning and purposes of the organization. This may be the reason why so many institutions are choosing the route of "diversity requirements" as the favored strategy of introducing multicultural organizational change.

When I visited the three campuses, I sensed that despite good intentions the approaches being employed to foster multiculturalism, were not appropriate. They were not likely to advance the aims of multicultural education as I outlined earlier. But I did not have a clear idea as to what was wrong with these approaches nor did I have recommendations for substitute approaches.

Feminist Critique of Normative Organizational Change Approaches

Feminist thinking can be helpful to us in understanding why conventional approaches of multicultural organizational change are unlikely to advance the three aims of the multicultural project: (1) the recognition of how differences are inscribed in relationships, political, and cultural practices; (2) the insurrection of subjugated knowledges; (3) the creation of unoppressive organizations.

In the remainder of the paper I provide a critique of current approaches to multicultural education by drawing on three insights from feminist thought. The three insights are: (1) the trouble with additive approaches; (2) the trouble with bipolar

differences; and (3) the trouble with the problematics that define multicultural education.

Additive approaches. Feminists have been particularly critical of curricular approaches that attempt to deal with the exclusion of women by simply "adding" women into the curriculum. The additive approach generally entails assigning readings by women, or highlighting the contribution of great women. Feminists, have shown, that such approaches, despite the increased presence of women, do not advance the transformative agenda of the feminist project in that structurally the curriculum remains unchanged, students are not confronted with the power inequities embedded in structural processes which make the exclusion of women appear as "natural." Additive approaches entail a strategy of inclusion that is depoliticized in that women get included in ways that do not defy male values of what constitutes authentic knowledge (Harding, 1987).

The feminist critique of additive approaches is particularly relevant as a basis for a critique of multicultural education approaches in colleges and universities. As mentioned earlier, campuses are infusing multiculturalism into the curriculum through the adoption of diversity requirements. Such requirements, frequently, constitute an "additive approach" in that they deal with gender, racial, sexual, ethnic, social class differences as if they were technical, exchangeable, and depoliticized categories, stripping them of their transformative potential. For example, at Urban University (a fictitious name

for a research site), the additive approach to multicultural curricular change led to a requirement that defines diversity as a category of eleven differences. The unfortunate outcome of such an approach is that it mechanizes multiculturalism: students fulfill the requirement by picking courses that address one or more of these differences. One difference is just as good as another. Thus the student who doesn't want to hear about sexual orientation or homophobia can choose a course on religion.

In this scheme differences are reduced to a "thing." Thus, the aim of the multicultural project "to recognize the relational, political, and cultural dimensions of differences" is eluded. Drawing on the ideas of African American feminist Maxine Baca Zinn and her colleagues (1986), Sandra Harding maintains that "differences" such as "race" or "gender" or "sexual orientation" "must be reconceptualized as a relationship rather than a "thing" or inherent property of people" (p. 214). For example, Sandra Harding speaks about gender differences politically as they are inscribed in a gender stratified society. Adrienne Rich (1980) also speaks of differences in political and cultural terms as a product of the "institution of compulsory heterosexuality."

The meaning of differences. Feminist theories are of further help in elucidating the conceptualization of "differences." Feminist theorists defy the dominant view of differences that are posed as oppositional and hierarchical dualisms or binarisms. Feminist scholars have developed incisive

analysis of the male bias in dualistic thinking such as hard vs. soft sciences; reason vs. emotion; public vs. private. Dualistic thinking informs much of the reasoning that deligitimizes the educational value of multiculturalism. One of the more blatant products of thinking that posits differences in a negative relationship is when campus leaders qualify their support for diversity with words to the effect of "diversity without compromising excellence."

Dualistic thinking is harmful because it makes the denigration of multicultural education justifiable. At Urban University (a fictitious name) one of the most impassioned arguments against the "diversity requirement" was made by a dean who attempted to deligitimate it by casting it, in hierarchic fashion, as curricular decision-making on the basis of social rather than academic criteria. In a memo to the faculty, he wrote that "the fundamental argument in favor of a diversity requirement rests on considerations of a social rather than an academic nature." To bolster the inferior-superior message encoded in the hierarchical dichotomization of social/subjectivist vs. academic/objectivist knowledge the dean continues in his memo to say that a curriculum based on social criteria is concerned with awareness, whereas a curriculum based on academic criteria is concerned with knowledge. In this binary scheme multicultural education merely contributes social awareness while all else--which tends to be white and male--presumably contributes academic knowledge.

Dualistic thinking is also evident in reasoning that is premised on the belief that for something to exist something else has to disappear; in the words of Patricia Hill Collins that it has to be decentered (Collins, 1991). I am referring to the dominant belief that multicultural education is oppositional to, and therefore threatens, community. For example, the president of Urban University, while being supportive of "diversity" efforts, in a speech to fellow presidents still felt compelled to warn of the potential dangers in "diversity." The president said, "As we move to a multicultural setting, it is important that we as leaders on our campuses do not move too far away from the vitality that our common national culture contains."

Feminist theorists have exploded the idea of a common culture. For example, Iris Young (1990), calls attention to the ideal of commonality as a totalizing force that gives rise to racism, ethnic chauvinism, class devaluation, homophobia, sexism.

The value of feminist critique and theories is in providing a counterpoint to conventional administrative thinking in that they invite us to critically engage the language we use. Feminism exposes the conspiratory role played by the language of traditional theories of academic administration and leadership in the production and maintenance of cultural practices that betray the very things to which we espouse support. The president of Urban University viewed herself as supportive of multicultural education yet the language she used was shaped by cultural values that give primacy to uniformity, coherence, and commonality.

Such language is inconsistent with the project of multiculturalism.

The Problematics of the Dominant vs. the Different Others

Conventional theories of administration and organizational change are unfit as a source of knowledge for multicultural organizational change because these theories were conceived from a managerial point of view. Our customary ways of doing administration are based on strategies of organizational change without altering existing power relations. Accordingly, multicultural organizational change that is informed by conventional theories of "good administration" is shaped by the "problematics" of the dominant class. Once again the case of Urban University and its diversity requirement illustrates this point. The curricular policy adopted at Urban construed the "realities" of diversity in demographic terms, thus the rationale for the diversity requirement was built almost exclusively on the changing racial and ethnic profile of the nation, the city where Urban is located, and its student body.

Another example that more blatantly demonstrates how the problematics of dominant groups shape multicultural education emerged from an interview with a trustee at an institution where 60% of the student population was of color. This trustee made it clear that the impetus for revising the mission of the institution to reflect a multicultural focus was based on the changing demographics and its potential effect on US competitiveness in the global marketplace. This is how he put

it, "Minorities are not as qualified for jobs as workers in countries like Japan and we have to make sure that we do not waste this potential." Ironically, this was an institution where the English Department faculty had dropped the Autobiography of Malcom X as required reading because they were tired of teaching it year after year.

When multiculturalism is shaped by the problematics of the dominant other the agenda becomes one of ensuring that the increasingly "nonwhite" working force will contribute to the maintenance of current living standards. Multiculturalism is thus defined in ways that leave intact the structures that foster monocultural--white, male, and heterosexual--values and norms.

Feminist thinking calls attention to the importance of interrogating policies by asking, Whose problematics are providing the impetus for multicultural education? Sandra Harding (1991) maintains that the problematics that define the problems that social scientists attend to are not necessarily of concern to women. As an example, she mentions that traditional social science is more concerned with the kinds of policies towards rapists and raped women rather than "with the standards of masculine sexual behavior that create a culture in which rape might be seen as inevitable." (p. 85). Similarly, I maintain that the problematics that inform current modes of multicultural education (e.g., changing demographics, the desire for harmonious diversity) are not necessarily the concerns of the "different others."

This brings me to a last thought. Taking a cue from Sandra Harding's assertion that "a feminist standpoint is not something one claims but an achievement" (1991, p. 185), I pose the following question, "Is it possible for individuals who belong to the ruling social and sexual class, who speak the ruling language, and are of the ruling gender achieve a vision of what a multicultural organization can and should be? The response to this question, I believe, is no. It is "no" because members of the dominant classes have yet to develop an awareness of the privileges they derive by being white or heterosexual or male and how lack of awareness of the privileges derived from one's race, sexual orientation, or gender contributes to the maintenance of political, economic, and social institutions that perpetuate power inequalities. It is not enough to pledge commitment to diversity, there needs to be a recognition that whiteness, heterosexuality, and maleness also constitute differences in race, sexual orientation, and gender and that these differences, whether overtly or covertly, operate, nevertheless, in opposition to the multiculturalist project. Black feminists have made use of their "dangerous memories" and of their positions of "outsiders within" (Collins, 1990) the academy, advantageously, to create knowledge that is oppositional to the dominant narrative. At the risk of sounding essentialist, multiculturalism should be viewed as a process that must take into account the vision of those who have experienced the struggles of existences that have been silenced and made

invisible by normative powers. This is not to say that there is a unique and distinct "female experience" or "lesbian experience" or "Latina experience" or "woman of color experience," nor do I want to imply that one's race, gender, social class, or sexual orientation make one qualified to represent the entire community (Fuss, 1989).

Reconceptualizing Multicultural Education

I want to conclude by offering a final observation that concerns how feminist thought can inspire the reconceptualization of multicultural education. I began this talk with a personal incident I experienced as coordinator of bilingual education in the NJ Department of Higher Education. As I prepared my remarks I went back and forth, should I say that this happened at the NJ Department of Higher Education or should I give it a fictitious name and maintain, as we researchers say, confidentiality? This problem of naming or not naming is central to our discussion. The dilemma of confronting practices that undermine institutional commitments to multiculturalism poses an inexorable barrier that we need to overcome. As long as we try to implement multicultural education without first coming to terms that our campuses are full of untold, racist, sexist, and heterosexist "micropractices" (Foucault, 1980) then we deceive ourselves and we harm our students.

A core concept in feminist thinking is that the personal is political. Recently, several women intellectuals have empowered this concept by disclosing personal experiences that publicly

expose how the micropractices of racism and sexism shape daily life in the academy. Patricia Williams (1991), an African American law professor, in The Alchemy of Race and Rights provides a series of personal essays through which she chronicles in sharp detail the many forms by which racism and sexism are practiced and perpetuated within the law classroom, in her interactions with her colleagues, in exam questions that present women and people of color in stereotypical roles, and in the content of student evaluations of her course. The testimony that Patricia Williams provides is powerful and moving, yet, I dare say that within most circles of influence such testimony is dismissed as too personalized, too subjective, too much emotion and not enough facts. Indeed, the penalties for the courage of such testimony are emotionally and professionally costly. So what we are left with on most campuses is silence for we have yet to develop the norms to engage in dialogues about the "personal." Without difficult dialogues about the personal multicultural education will hover at the margins of the academy, its promise for an educative and transformative practice unfulfilled.

References

- Baca Zinn, Maxine, Lynn Weber Cannon, Elizabeth Higginbotham, and Bonnie Thornton Dill. (1986). "The Costs of Exclusionary Practices in Women's Studies." Signs 11(2): 290-303.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. (1991). Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. (1986). "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." Social Problems 33.
- Fuss, Diana. (1989). Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference. New York: Routledge.
- Harding, Sandra. (1987). "Is There a Feminist Method?" In Sandra Harding (Ed.), Feminism and Methodology, pp. 1-14.
- Harding, Sandra. (1991). Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- hooks, bell. (1989). Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Rich, Adrienne. (1980). "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society, (Summer): 631-57.
- West, Cornel. (1991). "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual." In bell hooks and Cornel West, Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Young, Iris Marion. (1990). "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference." In Linda J. Nicholson (ed.) Feminism/Postmodernism. New York: Routledge, pp. 300-325.
- Williams, Patricia J. (1991). The Alchemy of Race and Rights. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.